

## LIVING

# GUESS WHAT'S COMING TO DINNER

*Life can be wild when mom and dad are zookeepers*

BY STEVE SOMERVILLE  
Staff Writer

While most parents try not to bring their work home with them, the same can't be said for the Claffey household in Markham. In fact, mom and dad are encouraged to bring their work home.

Imagine mom strolling in the front door accompanied by a 15-metre high giraffe or dad tugging on a pull-line trying to convince a stubborn camel to sit down for dinner.

While a giraffe and a camel as house guests might be a stretch, the Claffey parents do bring a strong love of wildlife and nature with them. Daughter Keelin, 7, and son Declan, 5, love animals as much as their parents.

At last count, family pets included a large black-and-white cat named Max, two Guinea pigs named Sheep and Sassy, a cockatiel named Cookie, an aquarium full of fish and two tree frogs.

About a year-and-a-half ago, both parents gave Keelin's kindergarten class at St. Monica Catholic Elementary School in Buttonville a fun presentation on insects, bringing with them a variety of beetles, cockroaches and spiders.

"The kids just loved it," Heidi said. "The bugs were a big hit."

"They took some bugs out and showed them to my class," Keelin said. "The boys thought they were neat. They didn't want to touch the spiders, though."

Dad pulled out a rhino beetle, a large bug with a rhino-type horn on its head.

"Its gross, ugly," Keelin said. "I like the real rhinos at the zoo."

Heidi works closely with the gorillas and other creatures in the African rainforest exhibit at the zoo. Oliver is supervisor of the Australasian exhibit and oversaw the giant panda, koala bear and komodo dragon exhibits that made headlines this decade. The couple has been together for 10 years, having met at the zoo.

Oliver came to Canada as a young man from Manchester, England, in 1969 and retains a noticeable central England accent. An avid animal lover throughout his life—his family operated a hobby farm when he was a boy—he was hired as one of 20 zookeepers at the newly built Toronto Zoo in January 1974. Opening ceremonies were in August that year.

*'There's a lot of interaction with the animals. They get to know your voice and which songs you are singing when you're working. They all have their own personalities.'*

There was a lot of work involved in getting the zoo ready for its opening, including working on animal enclosures and bringing in the animals and acclimatizing them to their new surroundings. Top zookeepers and animal care specialists around the world came to Toronto to train and work with the newly hired crew. The keepers also trained extensively at the San Diego Zoo, recognized as one of the world's best and renown for its research.

Many of the original Metro Zoo animals came from the old Riverdale Zoo, built in 1887. Located in Toronto's east end on the Don River, Riverdale became antiquated and somewhat run down in the 1960s and 1970s, which prompted Toronto to build a newer, bigger, world-class zoo.

"We moved animals by van up the DVP from the Riverdale Zoo," Claffey said. "We even brought an anesthetized polar bear—you can imagine if he woke up on us on the highway. We also brought orangutans and alligators."

Claffey worked his way up through the



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Heidi and Oliver Claffey (above) care for Casey and Kabul, two of the Metro Toronto Zoo's camels. At right, the zookeepers relax in their Markham home with daughter Keelin, 7, son Declan, 5, and a couple of pets of the not-quite-so-exotic variety.



ranks to his current position and surprises himself when he realizes he's been at the zoo for 25 years.

"I've put almost half my life into this place. It feels like home, it's a part of me. It's a beautiful place to work," he said. "Every day, trees and wild animals. We're outside in fresh air, inside it's the tropics (referring to the indoor exhibits). It's like being part of nature."

In 1995, he led a team responsible for the black ferret breeding and release program at the zoo. One of his proudest moments was witnessing the ferrets' release into the wildlands of South Dakota.

"Ferrets are one of the most endangered animals in North America," he points out. "I saw our Toronto-bred animals out there in the plains. It was a fantastic feeling."

Heidi, from Mississauga, has been at the zoo for 14 years. She won an internship placement through her animal care studies at Sheridan College. After her graduation, she was hired at the zoo.

One of her most exciting moments she

hopes doesn't happen again took place about five years ago.

A baby reindeer walking alongside its mother in a harness, being led in training, was spotted by an aggressive dog on a nearby movie set which ran toward the deer. Panicked, the newborn ran off, down into the depths of the Rouge Valley. Heidi, seven months pregnant with Declan at the time, chased after the young reindeer down a steep hill and around the heavily wooded area.

Eventually, with some back-up, she retrieved the runaway, nestled inconspicuously in a land-fill, and brought it back to the safety of its mother.

A typical work day for the zookeepers starts out with a brief meeting to go over the day's agenda and discuss the status of animals—those requiring special attention—among other issues and topics.

The keepers go to their respective areas to care for the animals—feeding them, clean-

See TALK, page 13.



## CHOOSE THE RIGHT SUNGLASSES

Less than two weeks to spring and we are all anxious to see more sun! Here are some timely tips on choosing your sunglasses.

You already know that lenses which provide **100% UV protection** are an absolute must. **Glass lenses** give crisper vision. **Polycarbonate lenses** may be ideal for summer (and winter) sports because of their safety feature. **Plastic lenses** may be lighter in weight, but they are prone to scratching.

**Photosensitive lenses** need about a minute to change from light to dark. Not good while driving since they do not work well behind the car's windshield. Practical for outdoor summer days with alternating sunshine and cloudy days.

**Polarized lenses** are great for eliminating glare and are best for water sports and also for glare while driving. Very good for eliminating glare from winter snow too.

**Clip-on Frames** can be custom made to fit any frame. They are an excellent option for people who already wear prescription glasses. They clip onto your existing frames by small magnets or special handles and are an inexpensive way to have (a second pair of) prescription sunglasses.

**Plastic frames** will be very stylish this summer. **Angular** and **curved** shapes, **titanium** and **aluminum** materials, **sportier** and **wrap-around** models, and **rubber temple tips** are "IN" this year.

Dr. H.H. Walji (Hons. BSc, MSc, OD, FIOS) Optometrist 471-EYES (3937), 6633 Highway #7, Markham

Website: www.DrWalji.com Email: DrWalji@DrWalji.com

